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Publication date:
2016

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Birkbak, A. (2016). *Social studies of publicity media? An issue-oriented perspective*. Abstract from 4S/EASST Conference, Barcelona, Spain.

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4S/EASST CONFERENCE BCN-2016

Science + technology by other means

Social studies of publicity media? An issue-oriented perspective.

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Short Abstract

The media are today considered a key part of politics “as usual”. But so far, STS has not engaged in a substantial way with publicity media. The paper proposes that such an engagement can build on issue-oriented perspectives on politics and takes steps towards exploring this potential.

Long Abstract

In a democracy, the public is supposed to be self-governing, which means the public is an indispensable part of legitimate political action. This makes the public a central component in democratic “politics as usual”. Yet, the public remains strikingly elusive in contemporary society. It is a complicated and often valuable feat to be able to determine the contours of the public or settle the opinion of the public, even if only for a moment (Lezaun 2007). Recent work in STS has studied methods for constructing the public, including focus groups, surveys, interviews and citizen hearings (Laurent 2011, Law 2009, Lezaun and Soneryd 2007). These techniques all draw on social science methods. However, the media also play an important role for the construction of publics today, which raises the question of what a social studies of media might look like. In this paper, I review work that has already been done to connect STS and media (Gillespie et al. 2014), suggesting that any sustained effort has yet to emerge. I propose that such an effort could start from the argument that controversial, sociotechnical issues are central to democratic politics (Marres 2007, Latour 2007). In addition to broadening the conception of politics, an issue-oriented perspective can be used to raise new questions about the publicity media that are already considered an important part of conventional politics. More specifically, an issue-oriented perspective prompts us to study media, whether news media or social media, as a set of techniques for temporarily assembling issue publics.